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ABSTRACT

The relative importance of family support, welfare, and educational factors as determinants of the child care decision making process was examined through unstructured interviews with parents whose children were enrolled in a variety of child care programs in Evanston, Illinois. Child care arrangements examined included nursery schools, family day care homes, centers operated by voluntary associations, and day care centers operated by the community and state. Parents were interviewed in groups of two to five persons in a four-week period. Data from nine group interviews involving 33 people indicated that family support factors predominated in terms of importance. Parents' decisions regarding choice of child care programs were highly influenced by the belief that both parents and children need multiple relationships outside the nuclear family. Cost, convenience (location and transportation), and hours of operation were of secondary importance to the type of family support environment desired. Parents sought a learning environment which would assist children in developing a degree of social competence appropriate for their ages and stages of development. Cognitively oriented programs with uniform prescribed sets of activities were clearly not desired. Parents desired a social environment comprised of a sexually, racially, and economically balanced group. It is suggested that the qualities desired by parents in the programs selected be utilized for focusing on policy issues to be addressed in the future. (CM)

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CHILD CARE: FAMILY SUPPORT, WELFARE--AND EDUCATION?

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Abstract

Historically child care was regularly provided as assistance to parents through extended family or community informal networks, as a luxury for high ses families through the purchase of individual services, or as a welfare benefit for low ses families where parental care was inadequate. With the advent of a lower birth rate, urbanization, and the increasing employment of mothers of preschool children, child care is emerging as a response to the need for extended social experiences for young children. Group interviews with parents whose children are enrolled in a variety of child care programs examined the relative importance of family support, welfare, and educational factors as determinants of child care decision making. Qualities desired by parents in the programs selected are utilized for discussing policy issues to be addressed if child care is to be regarded as an educational right.

Introduction

The relationship between children, families, and educational institutions involves an extremely complex set of policy issues. The provision of care for young children involves a socialization as well as a custodial and an educational component. Historically, children were provided with a knowledge of their cultural heritage through a limited set of social interactions within the family and immediate community. These primary relationships also provided for children's basic survival needs, including the learning of the skills necessary to become fully functioning members within the society. As technological innovations provided increased assurance of survival, while also demanding increasingly specialized skills, separate institutions emerged for transmitting these skills to children. Within the last century, the right of every child to have specialized skills training became public policy in the United States with the establishment of a universal right to a public school education. In this century, the age at which that training should begin is still a major policy issue to be resolved.

The age at which education should begin has been problematic due to traditional assumptions about the nuclear family and the nature of education. By limiting itself to the teaching of cognitive and applied skills, public education was predicated on the assumption that children would acquire basic self-help skills, language, motor coordination, and learn how to interact in a culturally appropriate fashion within the home. This model assumed that there would be an innate unfolding of these human characteristics in the presence of an adult caregiver,

usually the mother, reinforced by extensive primary contacts in the family and community. Separate child care institutions were created for children where no adult family members were available to provide for their care. Assuming an innate unfolding of human characteristics, these orphanages provided for only basic nutritional, health and safety needs. The devastating effect of such social neglect on children's survival and development was well documented (Bowlby, 1969). The failure of children to thrive was misinterpreted as resulting from maternal deprivation and reinforced the policy of excluding young children from public schools (Rutter, 1972).

Even in families where adult caregivers were present, particularly with immigrant families, there was a concern with the quality of care for young children if their families were perceived as incapable of socializing the children into American society. Day nurseries were established by philanthropic societies to teach the English language, self-help skills, and culturally acceptable behaviors to young children in addition to providing nutritional, health and safety services (Steinfels, 1973). During World War I the widespread belief that "problems in early childhood had caused the physical or mental deficiencies that disqualified so many men for military service" (Kerr, 1973: 160) resulted in young children's care and education becoming a national concern. It was at this time that nursery school experiences became available to children of the middle class. The nursery school's sole emphasis on social development contrasted with the day nursery's welfare emphasis.

During the Depression of the 1930's federal funds for child care became available, not designed primarily to provide care for young

children, but to provide jobs for unemployed nurses, teachers, and other support staff. For the first time federal and state funds were available for child care. Though the WPA nurseries were created to meet a welfare need, funding was channelled through state departments of education and local school boards. The possiblity of child care being educational was facilitated.

In order to encourage women to support the war effort through entering the labor force, federal funds were once again appropriated for day care. Former WPA nurseries received funding through the Lanham Act of 1942 because their location in schools enabled them to be easily administered. This funding by-passed traditional welfare channels through which day care programs had been administered

When Lanham funds ceased in 1946 centers closed in all states except California. Despite expectations that women would return to their family responsibilities, thereby making jobs available to returning veterans, the proportion of women in the labor force never returned to the pre-World War II level. In 1900, women were only 18 percent of all workers; in 1940, about 25 percent. The proportion reached a high of 36 percent during World War II, dropped back to 28 percent with the return of male veterans to civilian jobs, and then began to climb again (Suelzle, 1970: 51). Child care programs to facilitate women's participation in the labor force gained support from the Women's Liberation Movement as well as from professionals in the field of education and welfare.

Welfare and educational concerns with regard to child care were also fused through the War on Poverty's Head Start Program. The

purpose of Head Start was to compensate for family environments perceived as incapable of preparing children adequately for entry into the public school system. As national attention was focussed on the belief that children labelled "culturally disadvantaged" could benefit from early childhood education, middle-class parents became alerted to the same possiblities for their own children. "(T)he initial goal of enabling poor children to catch up with middle-class peers was modified to that of providing children with a learning environment and varied experiences to help them develop a degree of social competence appropriate for their ages and stages of development" (Levitan and Alderman, 1975: 88). The importance of the early childhood environment in developing social competence has been further documented through the study of families (White and Watts, 1973). Such studies reveal that not all families provide an optimal environment, suggesting that quality child care programs can function effectively as family support systems.

If existing child care programs are to function in a supportive fashion, it is necessary that they complement parental expectations, values and cultural norms. Children's nutritional, health, educational and social needs must be met by their families, through child care programs, or both. The lack of a comprehensive child care system is a source of frustration to politicians, administrators and researchers who desire optimum conditions for all children. It can be a source of frustration to parents who cannot find a program appropriate for the needs of their children. But for some parents the variety and idiosyncratic nature of child care programs can pre-

sent a situation in which genuine choices between socially acceptable alternatives are possible.

Studying labor force participation trends does provide some insight into the demand for child care services. In 1973 there were 4.4 million mothers of preschool-age children who were working in the United States. Age, education and marital status are all strongly associated with women's labor force participation. "Divorced, separated, and widowed women had higher labor force participation rates than their married counterparts...The rate of labor force participation for women with young children positively correlates with educational attainment...The presence of the home of children aged six years or less reduces the likelihood that their mothers will work. However, proportionately more college-educated women tend to work while raising young children" (Levitan and Alderman, 1975: 8-9). The majority of women in the labor force with preschool children do not fit an economic hardship sterotype. Merely knowing the number of women in the labor force with preschoolers does not reveal what types of care parents prefer and choose for their children (Zamoff and Lyle, 1973). Knowing that many working mothers are well educated and above a subsistence income level does suggest that some, if not all, parents have personal and economic resources enabling them to select between child care options. As public school enrollments are declining, creating unutilized excess capacity in school systems which could be made available for child care services, it is particularly important to assess how well the type of care sought by parents articulates with the educational focus of the public school system.

Respondent Selection and Interviewing Procedures

The study was conducted to explore the process whereby parents decide to have their children cared for on a regular basis by someone in addition to themselves. In order to assure a range of respondents, parents were interviewed whose child care arrangements included: nursery schools, family day care homes, centers operated by voluntary associations, and day care centers operated by the community and state. All of the programs were located in Evanston, Illinois, a city north of Chicago with a population of approximately 80,000.

The programs were initially contacted through a board of directors meeting of the Evanston Committee for Community Coordinated Child Care. This Committee is a multi-site, multi-funding organization which provides funding and service for children in a variety of programs thereby enabling low income parents to choose the program they would like their children to attend. All programs enroll guideline or scholarship children whose families pay none of the cost of their care as well as children from families who pay part of the cost based on a sliding-fee system, and children whose families who pay for the entire cost of the service.

Parents were contacted by the directors for an expression of willingness to participate in an interview about their child care decision making. Contacts were made in a variety of ways, formally through a parent governing board or by letter, or by informal direct personal contact. Interviews were arranged by telephone after the directors provided names of parents who would participate. The sample is thus self-selected and non-probability, and is probably biased in favor of

parents who are more actively involved in their children's care. Insofar as child care is becoming a more culturally acceptable alternative to one parent remaining home with young children on a full-time basis, we believe these more sophisticated respondents may be more indicative of future consumer preferences than a probability sample would be.

Parents were interviewed in small groups of two to five persons during a four-week period in the Summer of 1976. The data reported in this paper are from nine group interviews involving thirty-three people: 23 white females, 6 black females, 3 white males, and 1 black male. The sample included single as well as married parents, adoptive as well as biological parents, parents of children with handicapping conditions as well as parents of normal children, and interracial as well as homogeneous marriages. One of the participants was a grandmother. Their ages ranged from 21 to 50 years, education from high school graduates to Ph.D.'s, and family incomes before taxes from $6,000 per year to over $25,000. The sample included approximately equal numbers of Roman Catholic, Jewish and Protestant respondents, with the majority (over two-third's) describing themselves as politically liberal. Occupations included: counselor, clerical worker, editor of a journal, housewife, nurse, pediatrician, secretary, student and university professor. Cost of a single child's care paid for by the family ranged from nothing to $50.00 per week, with the median cost per week paid by the family being $36.00. Thus, while we suspect our sample to be biased in favor of respondents exhibiting more sophisticated consumer preferences, the range of respondent

characteristics reflected indicates that we did not merely tap a culturally or economically homogeneous group.

Group interviews were conducted utilizing a series of open-ended questions to guide the conversation. Questions covered how parents decided to have children cared for on a regular basis by someone in addition to themselves, what factors entered the decision to select their children's current arrangement, their feelings about the arrangements made, and their involvement in the programs. The unstructured group interview technique was selected due to its advantage for eliciting detailed material about the characteristics of, and variations in, these decision-making patterns. As parents talked to each other as well as to us, the flexibility of format enabled us to establish the contingencies that linked the factors in the decision-making process. This was especially important in assisting recall, especially where a series of different child care arrangements had been utilized, and in enabling parents to evaluate the relative importance of the factors that did influence their decision making. This paper is based upon these parents' reports concerning the importance of various factors that influenced their decisions in selecting particular child care arrangements. Although the factors were introduced in random order during the interviews, they have been conceptually grouped according to whether they primarily reflect family support, welfare, or educational values.

Family Support Factors

For all of the parents interviewed, their decision to place their children in child care programs emerged as an urban response to the

need for extended family ties. As one respondent said:

> I would very much like to have (our two children) in a very real extended family. My husband and I both grew up in large families. I come from a family of 6 children, he from 8. We both grew up where our aunts and uncles lived down the road and around and we were together alot with our cousins. So that we had a primary relation with our parents of course, but a lot of the parent-child tension or intensity was dissipated by aunts and uncles and cousins. All that kept us in our place too, and we were disciplined by a lot of different people. I really wish I could have that for my children, that type of thing, that lasting type of thing. One of the reasons I sent (my daughter to the center)--I'm not working now--is so that she gets away from me and I get away from her. It's not that I don't love her, but I think it's unhealthy for a child to always have no other adults than their parents to have as authority figures or to help structure their lives or to interact with.

Parents' decisions to find someone to assist them with the care of their children rest upon the belief that it is beneficial for children's social development to have primary relationships outside the nuclear family (Harrell and Ridley, 1975; Lesser, 1970; Perry, 1961; Ruopp, O'Farrell, Warner, Rowe and Freedman, 1973; Zamoff and Lyle, 1973). The need arises from the absence of a large extended family and the feeling that both parents and children need multiple relationships. These needs were expressed whether both parents were present in the family or not, whether the mother was employed or not, and whether the children were in a part-day or full-day program. "Since we lived a life which did not center around a family as such, there were no cousins around, I wanted her to start having a group experience as soon as possible, to have a place that was her own other than home, to be able to establish herself." "She needed it for more

creative stimulation than I could supply at home because I had a new baby at the time. And it was a good way for her to make friends. She was a very fast learner, and she needed some other environment which could keep up with her more." "I wanted to be closer to her. She needs the separation; I need the freedom. She needs to be independent and with other children since she's an only child." "Outside of being separated from my husband, it was very important that she be with other children. Whether I was being separated or not, I would have found a place for her."

Despite their belief in the beneficial effects of interaction with other children and adults in a child care program, parents were aware of the controversy over the age at which children should be cared for by someone else (Low and Spindler, 1968; Perry, 1961; Siegel and Hass, 1963; Stolz, 1960; Willner, 1965). Remembering their feelings the first day their children actually attended the child care program selected, many parents recalled experiencing doubt, guilt or anxiety despite the certainty of their convictions.

> Somehow for my parents there was less thought about having someone come into the home and maybe more discomfort, though no criticism, of sending a child out of the home. Especially since I'm not working and the question was, "Well, why did you want to send her to a nursery school?" I don't remember any criticism but they just wondered why, and they understood that in a city a child can't at three, you can't just open the door and say, "Run out an play dearie." You've got to have structured play and it's harder to find peers to play with and it has to be different.
>
> I remember very well how I felt the first day. My heart really ached. I stopped work when I became pregnant and he was three before I went back to work. And he didn't cry

> the first time, but he did the second and third and that made it even worse. I really felt guilty even though it was important.

It was the experience of the children themselves and their positve adjustments to the programs, that alleviated parents negative reactions while reinforcing their orignial decisons to seek group care for their children.

> The first day (my daughter went to the center) she went alone. I did not go with her because I had to work. Previously I took her to the school and we spent quite some time there showing her around. And I said that you're coming here Monday and the bus is going to come and pick you up. I worried about that before I sent her that way. And when she came home I said, "How did it go?" She was thrilled. She boasted about it. She went to school by herself, right the first day. That helped me too because I went to work more contented.

> I'm very happy generally because my daughter has grown in the past six weeks alot. And she feels very comfortable. All the anxieties I had about her being with other children, other negative things that I anticipated...but I was prepared and everything's turned out positively. I feel very good about it and she's happy there.

In fact, in many cases where children are very invested in the program separation anxiety is encountered at the opposite end of the day when the child is picked up from the program. This situation especially seems to occur when the parents' schedule is such that the child could be picked up before the program activities ended for the day. As one mother of a 2½ year old reported:

> I do remember all of my reservations about the 10 hour day were eradicated when I observed for an entire day in February. I've never had any doubts since that time. I know that this summer, when I've been getting off earlier and can take him home at 3:00, he never wants to leave that early and we usually end up staying until 5:00--

> both of us since it's not worth it for me to make two trips. This fall when I can still get off at 3:00 we'll probably have to make arrangements for his father to pick him up at 5:30 because he never wants to leave that early.

Welfare Factors

The welfare-related factors which are required to meet families' basic economic needs--cost, convenience (location and transportation), and hours of operation--are important determinants of the child care arrangements selected (Harrell and Ridley, 1975: 560; Low and Spindler, 1968: 24-26; Parnes et al., 1971: 132; Rowe and Husby, 1973: 114; Zamoff and Lyle, 1973: 354). They were important factors to the parents we interviewed, but not the deciding factors, and definitely of secondary importance to the type of family support environment desired.

Cost did put some of the more expensive programs out of the range of some families interviewed, but in no case were parents without alternatives within the range of their ability to pay. While there were economic limits, parents, whose incomes were high enough that they did pay for at least part of their children's care, agreed that they would pay a little more money for the type of program desired rather than accept a poorer quality substitute to save money. Their attitude was summed up by the mother of a 3½ year old: "Cost was a factor because my husband is a student and we're limited, but it had high priority and we were willing to do without some other things that we hold dear. It had priority with some other things. So a placement had to be pretty expensive before we wouldn't have figured out some way to do it." Several parents also cited specific examples

of having put this attitude into practice in terms of not selecting the cheapest available alternative. For example, the parents of a 2½ year old, having just moved from another state, rejected a program they felt was all fantasy play and custodial care despite the fact that they were impressed by the physical facility and the staff. They finally selected a program which they felt was more sophisticated and developed despite the fact that their cost was almost doubled. Other parents did not even ask the cost in advance, assuming costs to generally run about the same, but admitted they would have withdrawn their children had the cost been outlandish when the bill came. The parents of a 3½ year old paid extra for a full-week program despite the fact that the mother's part-time job meant care was only needed 3 days a week and they could have found a cheaper part-time program. They decided "it was important enough that he was in a good place and worth the extra money." The mother of a 1½ year old paid her family day care home provider more than the fee charged because she felt the quality of care provided was so high that she "had to go by how much I was earning." Thus whereas cost was a factor, these parents also recognized that when they looked at the alternatives their demand curve was virtually inelastic. They were willing to make sacrifices in other areas to provide the social environment desired.

Convenience, in terms of location and transportation was similarly an important, but not decisive, factor. Both low income and high income parents had actually changed their places of residence to be near the program desired rather than accept an inferior substitute close to their former residence. Within reasonable commuting constraints, the needs of the children were viewed as primary over those

of their parents.

> A car pool was already set up and it was very convenient. But if it were not a good school, if I didn't have good feelings about it, I would not have sent her there just for the convenience.
>
> I got lucky because it was half a block from where I was living, and now it's a good ten minute drive, but there's no question of not continuing just because of distance.
>
> I have to work and I'd have to change my hours, you know, to another job, if it was convenience. I think his being around children and learning is more important than my hours or convenience. Like I said, what are you working for if not for your children?

In general, hours of operation emerged as a more serious consideration than either cost or convenience. For working parents, programs which observed public school holidays meant chronic problems in searching for alternative care when these did not match the holidays at their places of employment. Closing times presented much more of a problem than opening times. Many centers close at 5:30 making pick-up an incredible rush for parents working until 5:00. Before accepting a position, parents had to make it clear to employers the imperative nature of their leaving on time. Still, many experienced chronic anxiety as they battled rush hour traffic to be at the center on time. For some the anxiety was compounded by concern over the trustworthiness of an older automobile, especially during the winter months. For some who simply could not manage the half-hour dash, because the distance was too great, their options were restricted to the smaller number of programs open until 6:00. Some parents, all mothers, had changed jobs because they experienced the tensions as too disruptive

to their relationship with their children when they picked them up. In general, hours of operation was the single factor with which working parents were the most dissatisfied.

Educational Factors

Persistent issues in early childhood education which represent alternate approaches to socializing children are heredity and environment, maturation and training, self-regulation and extrinsic control (Almy, 1975: 44-48). Heredity is important insofar as each child's unique qualities are considered, whereas it is equally important to provide the best possible environment for all children. The appropriateness of the training provided in relation to the maturity of the children leads to the question of whether specific skills instruction pays off better at the next level of development than a generally varied experience. In terms of curriculum it is a question of permitting children many choices or of perscribing most of the activities. Consistent with their emphasis on the family support factors of child care programs, the parents we interviewed clearly stressed the relative importance of heredity, maturation and self-regulation. Environment, training and extrinsic control were important, but subordinate to basic socialization values. They sought a learning environment which would assist children in developing a degree of social competence appropriate for their ages and stages of development. The development of competence in this context has been defined by Fein and Clarke-Stewart (1973: 4) as: "one that emphasizes the development of the ability to modulate transactions with people and things, to seek complexity and challenge, and to generate new procedures for dealing with

novel and unexpected situations," pointing up "the processes of competence rather than its contents." Education in child care programs is viewed less as preparation for the future based upon broadly defined adult roles than as concerned with the immediate needs and interests of children (Evans, 1971: 31). The image of children in a traditional public school classroom setting, all bent over the same academic task, with little opportunity to move about or interact, was presented as a negative example of what parents did not want in a child care program.

> He's just two years old and he should be a child. I don't want him sat down and constantly taught things from a book. I think kids are pressured to learn too much when they're young. I think that's why there's so much unhappiness and insanity in school.

Cognitive development and learning were appreciated, but only insofar as they emerged as part of the socialization process.

> I had been to alot of day care centers where there was alot of free play and I liked that at first, I thought, well, that's what she needs, just the socialization. But as I'm learning more, I realized she needed alot more learning.

> When I talk about structure and freedom, I don't mean that they should be sat down and taught the alphabet. I think that kids find it interesting to have things put to their minds sometimes, and I really don't see how you can separate socialization from what you would call learning. Cramming kids with little facts to show mommy and daddy is pointless and destructive, but if you have socialization kinds of things you're going to come up learning.

> They are doing fine, constructive, playful, adventurous things as contrasted with other centers where there is just a sitting service.

Structure was viewed as important, insofar as the materials provided

and the physical layout of the facilities encouraged self-pacing through multiple opportunities.

> There's about six areas. There's alot of space for children to be together but there are also alot of places for children to go all by themselves. And there are alot of options, like the water room, and the quiet corner, and the book, the library area--I don't know what the names of them all are--the painting area, and all.
>
> She has a quiet time where they sit and listen to records and they dance while they're listening to the records, and some exercising. They also have a quiet time where she reads them books. If they pick up a book and bring it to her she'll read it to them, or at least part of it while some of the other children are doing other games.

But, program activities and facilities were viewed as important only insofar as the personal qualities of the staff enabled them to be utilized to enhance each child's social development.

> You could have a crummy school and if your staff is good, your kids will have a positive experience. And you can have the most beautiful facilities, but if the staff is poor, it can be a disaster.
>
> I think the environment is better than I could create at home. I also view each child as an individual and have wanted certain things to come out and usually it's happened, they did. My first son was a very passive, non-aggressive type. It was almost like there was an element of planning. He became good friends with a very aggressive child, just the opposite. It was marevellous, you could almost see the synthesis. I think the key element is the staff, their sensitivity and understanding in creating a proper environment. In the parent conferences and parent meetings, I've always been impressed with the perceptiveness of the staff. They treat each child as a person, an adult, human being. Children aren't grouped or categorized.
>
> They don't sit around and talk like some nurseries. They're there to talk with the child and keep their

> eyes on the child and see how the child interacts with other children. They really work hard.

Type of Social Environment Desired

When asked about the importance of family support, welfare, and educational factors in deciding upon a particular child care arrangement for their children, many parents spontaneously mentioned the importance of their children being part of a sexually, racially, ethnically, and economically mixed group. Parents actively sought programs where there was a balance provided along these dimensions. Balance was thought of not as a specific proportion, but as a situation in which there would be children who were both different from and the same as their own in these respects. Sexual, ethnic, racial and economic balances were not viewed as problems except at the extremes, i.e., these parents did not want their child to be a minority of one in a group on any of these dimensions. Their feelings were summed up by the father of a 5½ year old.

> Any type of program, like any type of school, should be a microcosm of the universe so that they can develop positive attitudes toward alot of things in a controlled environment. So that the world doesn't shock them. And what you know, what you understand, you can't hate.

While parents were unanimous in their agreement that it was beneficial for their children's social development to interact with staff and peers of different sexes, races, ethnic and economic backgrounds, they gave more qualified answers when it came to a consideration of children with handicapping conditions where the intellectual or physical developmental stages of the children could be very different. In terms of social development the integration was viewed positively

and their own or other children's lack of awareness as a result of segregation was cited as a negative example.

> There's nothing like bringing normal kids and handicapped kids together when they're young enough to not have preconceived notions or to be put off by, if you will, the externals. And I don't think anything goes further towards humanizing children than exposing them and letting them cope. My daughter can deal with her own aggressive feelings by seeing the kid who's more out of control with his own aggression.

> I don't think I ever came across a handicapped person in any way at all until I was in junior high or high school. And it was frightening. I still deal poorly with it. I think if I had been exposed with understanding at a very young age, I might be more accepting today.

> It makes a difference when you grow up with someone. My 8-year-old and my 6-year-old have never been around physically handicapped children so when they see them, they point them out. If (my 14-month-old) was growing up with them, he would learn about it and know about it, and he would be smarter about it than my 6-and8-year-old who point it out as something wrong.

Their ambivalence arose then, not around the goal of integrating children with handicapping conditions with normal children, but around practical problems of implementation such that each child's unique needs could be met.

> It depends on how large the staff is and how the staff is deployed. If there was a large enough staff to provide the additional need, it could be a good experience if it was introduced to children positively--to be able to get along with handicapped peoples, to understand them, to develop a sensitivity.

> If it was staffed in such a way that the gifted or slow kids weren't bored, if the levels were adjusted and it were a multi-level program, fine. Because there are very few kids who are slow in all respects, or gifted in all respects.

Parents of children with handicapping conditions, currently enrolled in special early intervention programs through the public school district concurred.

> Having Down's syndrome he has a great tendency to imitate whatever is going on. We would like for him to imitate some normal behavior patterns if that were possible. I'm absolutely not opposed to him going to school with handicapped children...but I think that there should be some nonhandicapped kids in the program.
>
> (My son) is quite able to relate to nonhandicapped children. His behavior is quite within average norms, you know. I don't think he would have any trouble being in a preschool program with nonhandicapped children. But programs with nonhandicapped children don't offer the therapy he needs. He needs speech and occupational therapy because he's doing some very specific things incorrectly which would not be worked on in a normal school setting.

In general then these parents desired a wide range of social contacts for their children in order to maximize their appreciation for the diversity of the American Cultural heritage. At the same time they desired a balance such that no child would be in a minority of one, and an environment wherein the special needs of one group would not outweigh the individualized attention believed necessary for all.

Policy Implications

With a declining birth rate, increased urbanization, and more mothers of preschool children remaining in the labor force, child care programs are gaining in importance as a response to the need for extended social experiences for young children. The present study investigated the relative importance of a number of factors that influence parental decision making in the selection of a program for

preschool children. Family support, welfare, and educational factors were fused, but family support factors overwhelmingly predominated in terms of importance. Parents desired a social environment in which children would interact with staff and peers fram a variety of social backgrounds, in which each child would be treated as an individual without invidious comparisons, and in which learning would emerge through children experiencing many choices from varied opportunities. A traditional skills and cognitively oriented classroom setting with a uniform prescribed set of activities was clearly not desired. Motor development and cognitive learning were highly valued, but only insofar as they emerged naturally from the socialization process. These parents wanted their children to learn to appreciate their own strengths and weaknesses in a culturally pluralistic society.

Child care was viewed as the right for children to develop autonomously in a group setting outside the nuclear family--not as a necessity or as a luxury. The programs in which the children were enrolled actually varied quite considerably including emphases on fantasy play, the prepared environment of the Montessori Method, Piagetian-based curriculum, behavior analysis, and a socio-emotional family environment. Parents often described the merits of the program they had selected by pointing to features they regard as negative in programs they had rejected. Parents who had made different choices would reverse the process. Some parents value highly arts and crafts products brought home by their children as evidence that the child enjoys the program, whereas other parents view such projects as gimmicky and detracting from their children's interpersonal growth. Some parents enjoy

special programs put on by the children for their value in increasing poise and self-confidence whereas other parents want their children to perform for themselves only and not for public display. Some parents prefer staff to dress informally and to interact on a first-name basis whereas other parents prefer just the opposite. Some parents prefer religious and moral training, especially at holiday time, whereas others do not. Features of a program that strike one parent as warm and nurturant will strike another as casual if not sloppy. Similarly, features of a different program which strike one parent as cold and unfeeling will strike another as evidence of being well organized. There does not seem to be any right or wrong inherent in these evaluations for all the programs have been in existence long enough to have experienced children successfully making the transition to the public school system. What does seem to be involved are very different life styles and family rituals which parents value highly. In searching for an appropriate child care program, they look for one that matches their own priorities for structure, cleanliness (allowing children to get their clothes dirty or not), interpersonal demeanor, dress, and culturally appropriate activities.

If the government and the community also come to perceive and support child care as an educational right rather than as a welfare burden, then serious consideration will have to be given to the creation of a delivery system which provides for the range of alternatives currently available. Unutilized space in public school systems would be a bonus insofar as the physical facilities are well maintained. Parents spoke despairingly of the tendency for child care programs to

be operated out of basements and in dilapidated structures. They spoke of the stark contrast between cheerful, colorful, artistic classrooms and gloomy exteriors. Next to the problem of program hours being too short for some employment situations, the conditions of the physical facility was the only other consistent area of dissatisfaction. But clearly these parents would not willingly trade physical facilities for an impersonal, standardized curriculum. The challenge is one of our ability to make child care freely available to all children without sacrificing its present family support factors for an impersonal product oriented bureaucracy.

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